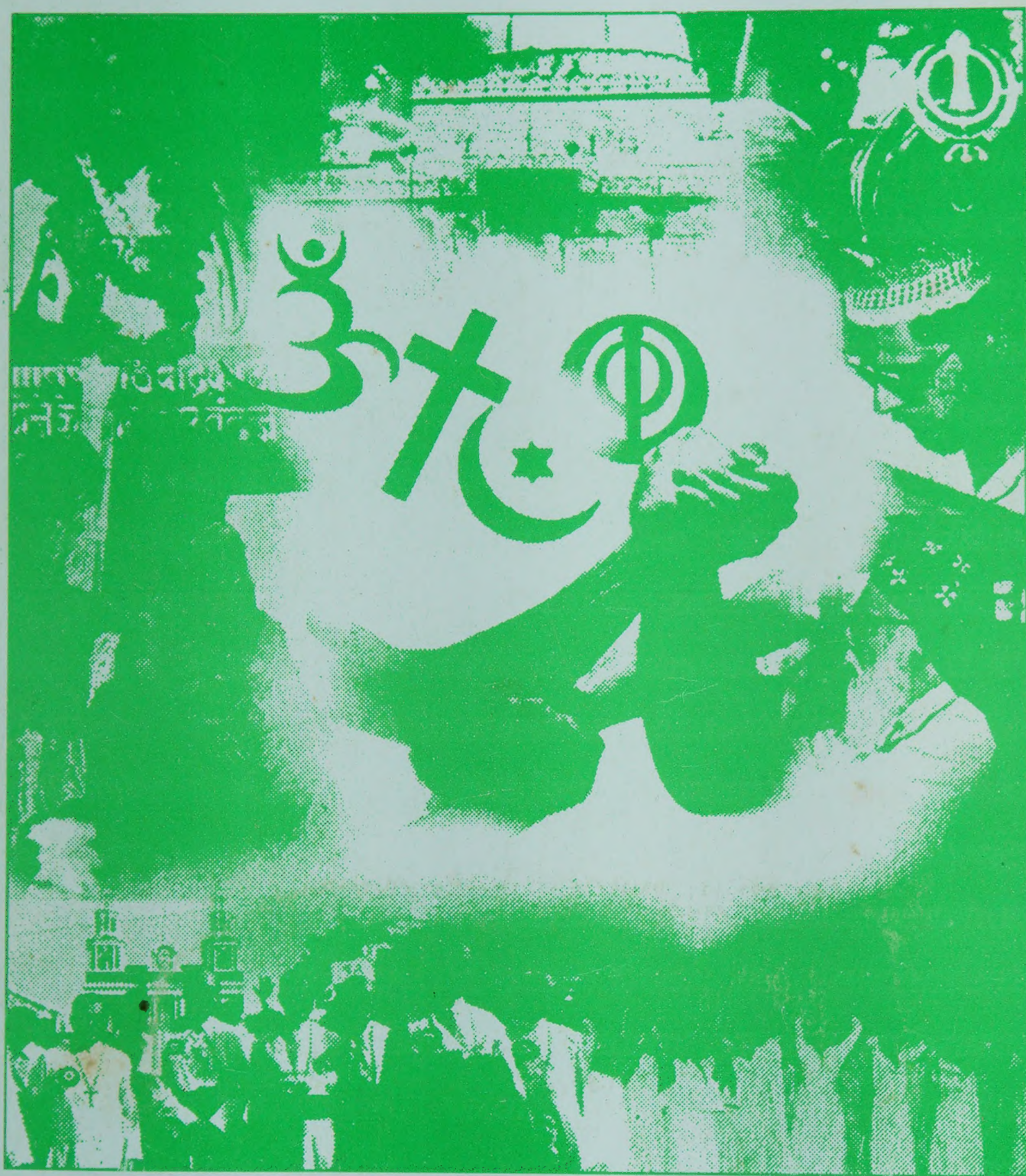


# PEOPLES' AGENDA



## GENERAL ELECTION 1999



# COMMUNITY HEALTH CELL

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## INTRODUCTION

*While declaring India as a sovereign, secular, democratic republic, the Framers of our Constitution assured to all Indian citizens equality, liberty, fraternity and justice. In recent years and particularly months, the Constitution is under attack. This People's Manifesto is drafted and circulated in the hope that it will help each and every one of you, as individuals and members of groups, to reflect on the political scenario and to assist the process of restoring the Constitution to its original power and glory by judicious voting in the forthcoming General Elections.*



## Peoples' Agenda

As the Indian electorate goes to the 13th General Elections in September 1999, fresh in its memory is how close the country came to a war in May-June 1999. But for the valour and sacrifices of our brave soldiers and airmen, the lifeline of the people of Kashmir and Ladkhakh could have been severed by armed intruders. They entered deep into Indian territory at Kargil, while the government of Prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee remained preoccupied with resolving its internal contradictions, pandering to vested interests and bartering with self-centered political partners to cling to power.

In the 15 months that they have been in power, including the months as caretaker government after their defeat in the Lok Sabha, the BJP and its allies have brought one disaster after another on the nation. The alliance started a nuclear weapon race in the sub-continent, committed atrocities on the minorities, pandered to global monopolies, cow-towed to religious fundamentalists in Hinduising education and destroying our pluralist cultural fabric and connived with hoarders and black marketeers. The people watched with deepening anxiety as Dalits were tortured, Churches demolished and missionaries burnt, farmers were driven to suicide and marginalised groups pushed to despair. The Constitution's safeguards for the minorities and for the rule of law came under threat.

Under the BJP coalition government, prices have soared, unemployment has increased, slum-dwellers and internal migrants have been robbed of their right to shelter. Even the urban middle class has had to face the trauma of rising crime, ineffective policing and unrelenting water and electricity crisis. The only ones to have profited under this regime are big businessmen and vested political interests who have fed on the internal contradictions of the coalition.

The fall of the Vajpayee government conclusively proved that the parties forming the coalition lacked ideological cohesion, a prerequisite for democratic governance. Theirs was an alliance of convenience propelled by the lust for power. They showed this in the manner in which they formed the government without a clear mandate in



the last general elections. The Bharatiya Janata Party and Shiv Sena led alliance remained in power because of the outside support of the Telugu Desam. This proves that they could not muster a “genuine” majority in the Lok Sabha, and remained a minority in the Rajya Sabha. The government finally fell when the AIADMK pulled out.

The resultant casualty for the Indian body politic, in the 12th Lok Sabha, was the surrender and consequent betrayal of the Indian electorate by fifteen “secular” parties, to the “One Nation, One People and One Culture” agenda of the BJP and its Parivar. Though the BJP-Shiv Sena sought to fool the people through the so called National Agenda for Governance (NAG), it was soon clear that the only agenda the government would implement was the one enunciated by the Sangh Parivar in the BJP’s election manifesto:

*The BJP is committed to the concept of “One Nation, One People and One Culture”. The BJP is convinced that Hindutva has immense potentiality to re-energize this nation... This can and does trigger a higher level of patriotism that can transform the country to greater levels of efficiency and performance. (BJP Election Manifesto, 1998)*

It is important to remember this as once again the BJP and its allies have announced a National Democratic Alliance to fight the next general elections under the same common minimum programme.

Most of the important decisions and actions initiated by the Vajpayee government confirmed its determination to push the communal “Hindutva” agenda. Within days of coming to power, the government forgot the promise made by the coalition, that of initiating “the advent of a new age of reconciliation and accord; of dynamic economic growth with our cherished values of humanism in the forefront.” These were conveniently replaced by a meticulously planned caste and communal hate campaign. The BJP even went back on its own Election Manifesto proclamations of, “equal opportunity for all”, “dynamic secularism: justice for all and appeasement to none” and “the swadeshi spirit”, which they had so passionately advocated.



## Absence of Effective Governance

It is not difficult to identify the high points of misgovernance of the BJP-led coalition and its anti-people policies.

The first major deviation from national consensus was the decision to test nuclear devices, radically altering India's nuclear policy. In the process, the government created an unnecessary national security risk and harmed our attempts to gain a well-deserved permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Did this coalition, possessing a wafer thin majority, had the necessary mandate?

The government initiated policy changes in the other sectors as well. Concerted efforts were made to "Hinduisse" our education system. In blatant disregard of public outcry, it appointed men who openly professed the "Hindutva ideology" as heads of important institutions. After a series of individual appointments and manipulations, the BJP finally gave an exposition of its master plan at the Annual State Education Ministers meet, where the Human Resources Development Ministry announced a total "hinduisation" of the education system. It was foiled only because of a national outcry and revulsion at such absolute communalisation of knowledge.

It has been the song of those who thirst for absolute power that the interest of the state requires that its affairs should be conducted in secret. Indeed, secrecy has been the hallmark of this government. Whether it was in the post-Pokharan US-India dialogue or the sacking of the Chief of the Indian Navy, the people in power consistently refused to reveal any facts to the Indian public. Also, there have been many more things done in secret of which the people have no knowledge other than surmises from occasional statements of coalition partners whose own interests were under pressure. Demands from some prominent alliance leaders to amend the Constitution and impose a Presidential form of government clearly exposed the underlying thirst for absolute power. Even the process of softening state control over the mass media, initiated with the formation of the Prasar Bharati, has been consciously impeded and finally reversed by the Vajpayee government.



The BJP and its alliance partners have spent crores of government money and have misused the state media in announcing that they are the only political formation capable of providing a “stable” government. But for every single day in their 15 months in power, the people of India could clearly see how “unstable” the coalition was and how little its partners believed in their own unity. Unending threats of withdrawal of support by major political players in the alliance, such as the AIADMK, Trinamool Congress and the Haryana Lok Dal brought one pressure on the government, while another was the strategy of the “Sangh Parivar” to incorporate the “hindutva agenda” in the policies of the state, notwithstanding the “secular” promises made in the NAG. The Home Minister, Mr Lal Krishan Advani did not blush when he had to crawl to Mumbai and beg the Shiv Sena leadership to allow the Indo- Pakistan cricket series.

A major casualty under the BJP coalition government was grass roots democracy. Not a single State Panchayat election took place. Even the pre-poll pledges of the BJP, to create separate States for Uttarakhand, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand were abandoned on the plea that other political parties were not supportive. Before coming to power, the BJP had time and again made public its resolve to delegate powers on land, law and order and finance to the National Capital Territory of Delhi government. Once in power, it quickly forgot those promises. Like other governments in the past, Vajpayee’s coalition too, shelved the Sarkaria Commission recommendations.

Preoccupied with such politicking and power play, none within the government were interested in addressing and alleviating the immediate socio-economic problems of the masses. Instead of evolving new and effective economic programmes for the upliftment of the marginalised groups, the government remained loyal to the hypothetical “trickle down” globalisation recipe for development. As a result, powerful external economic forces received the necessary impetus to bully us into liberalising our economy. Many domestic business groups also got a free hand, as was evident in the mustard oil and the onion crises.



Despite the Finance Minister's tall claims, Central and State finances deteriorated in the past 15 months. The estimates of the fiscal deficit for the year 1998-99 presented in the budget, and the projections for 1999-2000 have been challenged. The policy of "living beyond the means" continued to be followed both by the Centre and the States. Calls for financial discipline and strict implementation of austerity measures went unheeded. Revenue collection, especially direct tax revenues, indicate dismal tax governance. No indications came from the government to show that they intended to tax the upper and middle classes and the rich "corporate" farmers. As usual the new tax policy concentrates on a simplified but higher set of indirect taxes that affect the poor.

Gross violations of human rights of the tribals, dalits, women and other marginalised groups, became a norm rather than an exception during this rule. Members of the Sangh Parivar, on the other hand, received the necessary stimulus to impose their aggressive 'Hindutva' ideology on the masses, especially the dalits, and in the process committed atrocities on the minorities. This led many to exclaim, "governance is at its ebb".

### **Deterioration in the Law and Order Situation**

The past few years have witnessed a sharp rise in the annual crime rate across the country. During the BJP led rule the intensity and barbarity of many acts of violence have shaken the nation. Data from government and media records clearly indicates that States governed by the parties forming the alliance exhibited a worse law and order situation than the others. Senior members of the police and judiciary have pointed to the growing nexus between politicians, criminals and business interests in these States, on one hand, and the aspirations of the fundamentalist forces on the other. The victims have invariably been women, dalits, tribals and minorities.

Though they proclaim high moral principles, several leaders of the BJP and its allies in the government were allegedly involved in corrupt practices, and some even faced criminal charges in courts. Close relatives of important ministers and party office bearers in



some states have been indicted in violent crimes including murder. Dissidents within the BJP have themselves accused their Chief ministers and Ministers of casteism, favouritism, nepotism and serious violations of ethical norms of governance.

*Uttar Pradesh tops the list in gender discrimination. More than 70 per cent of the women surveyed, in a recent study, faced several harassment at work. According to another study conducted by the NCW, nearly 50 per cent of working women surveyed face sexual harassment at work. (The Asian Age, 12 Aug. 98)*

To consolidate the Hindu vote bank, planned attempts were made to whip up communal and caste frenzy in many parts of the country. This led to a near collapse of law and order in States like Gujarat, Bihar, Maharashtra and Orissa. Gujarat had the dubious distinction of being the first state in the country after Independence where Muslims fled entire villages in the face of communal assault, where a Dalit Christian's body was dug out of its grave, where 400 Bibles were burnt and where finally in an orgy of violence, dozens of churches were razed to the ground in the district of the Dangs. The Union government, instead of reprimanding erring and incompetent State governments, used the situation to push its political ambitions. While it advised imposition of President's rule in Bihar for breakdown of law and order in the State, it refused to call for similar measures in Gujarat and Maharashtra, where the situation was much worse.

The government looked on as the Hindutva forces then tried to stamp their intolerance on arts and culture. A few weeks after the premier of the film "Fire", Shiv Sainiks attacked and vandalised theaters screening the movie in Mumbai and Delhi. Rather than reprimand those responsible for such rioting, the leaders of the Shiv Sena publicly praised the act and announced that they would allow the film to be screened only if the name of its characters are changed.

While they attacked "Fire" the alliance did nothing for women's rights. The debate on death penalty for rape which was initiated by



this government at public meetings and fora, made many to suspect that its prime objective was to attract attention of innocent women voters. Instead of really addressing women's issue it further negated women their rights.

*Why didn't the Shiv Sainiks storm the auction and protest the exploitation of women for sexual purposes? Surely this is an outrage to "normal behaviour?" (The Indian Express, 9 Dec. 98)*

## Peace and Disarmament

One of the major concerns of the people of India, howsoever poor they be, is peace and stability in the subcontinent. A reign of peace and tranquility, of harmony between the neighbours, can provide the necessary environment for economic growth and development. Peace between India and Pakistan and with other neighbours also helps in consolidating communal harmony within the country. It strengthens secular forces and marginalises fundamentalists, bigots and jingoists. The very first major act of the BJP-led government was the nuclear explosions that dealt a severe blow to the process of normalisation of relationship between Pakistan and India. Within

*While the saffron State is winning laurel by exploding bombs in Pokhran, it remains a sad truth that a majority of the Dalits and Bahujan women and men are still deprived of their elementary human rights. (Gail Omvedt, The Hindu, Madras 6 July 98)*

days, Pakistan exploded its own bombs, and then test fired the missiles that could carry its nuclear arsenal. Defence Minister, George Fernandes made matters worse by identifying China as India's biggest enemy, demolishing decades of diplomatic efforts to normalise relations between the two Asian giants. As a result, Indo-China relations reached their ebb. India has paid an enormous price for the dubious distinction of joining the nuclear club. In spite



of the claims it had to face a near-war situation in Kargil in which highly trained pilots and many brave soldiers have made the supreme sacrifice.

The cost of creating a minimal deterrent of 10 to 20 fission weapons will cost India 20,000 crore rupees. The cost of maintaining a nuclear deterrent will be 0.5 to 1% of GDP or around 8,000 to 16,000 crores of rupees per annum. This will increase our military spending by 25 to 40% a year.

*Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat is the first defence chief in the history of India to be sacked. The BJP government and defence minister George Fernandes earned the dubious distinction of taking this unprecedented step merely because the former Chief of Naval Staff, a thinking man and an acknowledged strategist, had his own opinion on matters concerning the Navy which did not conform to the views held by the present political dispensation. (Seema Mustafa in The Asian Age, 24 April, 99)*

India's Defence services have had a proud record of service and loyalty to civil democratic authority. The BJP coalition has tread on dangerous ground by trying to communalise and politicise the Services. Defence Minister's role in the Bhagwat controversy is a painful reminder of the far-reaching consequences of political manipulation.

## **Social Sector: Indifferent to the Poor**

The alliance displayed its utter bankruptcy in ideas and commitment in addressing the social sector. No worthwhile policies were framed for employment, health, housing, clean water, education and stable income, for both the rural and urban poor. On the contrary, pandering to the urban elite and the Hindutva brigade the government promised a nuclear umbrella, missile cover, expensive white goods and consumer durable, kentucky fried chicken, colas and canned beer. It showed more determination in doing away with the Urban Land Ceiling Act, passing the Patents and the Insurance



Sector Reform Bills than in compelling State Governments to initiate realistic and pro-poor land reforms. Subsidies available to the small farmers, small and medium entrepreneurs were removed or cut. Even the vestige of a public distribution system (PDS) that was working before this government took the oath of office was done away with. A rich socialite who breaks the law with impunity can easily get a ration card while the poor residing in the slums have to struggle for one. And if they do get one, they have to wait in unending lines for elusive kerosene and sugar.

The BJP slavishly followed the dictates of its allies representing the rich farm lobby, and pushed ordinary farmers further into indebtedness. The tragedy of poor farmers reached its peak in Andhra, Maharashtra and even “prosperous” Punjab, where many were forced by circumstances to commit suicide. For the first time in decades, food security was affected, leading to reports of starvation deaths.

The government’s spending on the social sector continues to be less than 8 per cent of its gross domestic product. Though the government is proud of its nuclear strength, India is close to the bottom of world’s social spending list, with no safety nets for the working class and the unemployed, no mass medical insurance, and no social security for the old. Any government should be ashamed that India spends a mere 7.1 percent of its GDP on housing and social welfare, while other third world countries like Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Brazil are spending 11.4, 16.6 and 30.0 percent respectively. Vajpayee government’s 1999-2000 allocations for agriculture and rural development are no more than 3.6 and 7.6 percent of the total budget, less than what was proposed and actually spent in the preceding budget period.

For the first time since the Emergency, in a rare display of aggression bulldozers were turned on slum dwellers as the ruling coalition bared its anti-people character. In major urban centres across the country it ordered the bulldozing and destruction of thousands of jhuggis and jhompris without arranging alternative resettlement sites for the slum dwellers. Lakhs of persons were left without shelter, their children and women vulnerable to disease,



assault and rape. Particularly targeted were slums with sizable populations of the minority and Dalit communities, merging an anti-people programme with an added dimension of communal and caste bias. The process of displacement of population because of development projects, which has been going on since the 1950s, sharpened during this regime. Plans are now afoot to displace thousands of people, mostly from the Dalit and Tribal communities, from their habitations to make way for mega- development projects. The policy of “throwing out the poor to provide facilities for the rich,” which has been followed by many previous governments continues.

*Displaced by the Nagarjunasagar dam 40 years ago, the tribals still don't have even drinking water let alone power or patta for land. Here they kill or sell their girls but officials say they have no idea. (The Indian Express, 10 April, 99)*

Though it promised to nurture the health of the Nation, the BJP-led government failed miserably in the health sector. It helped sharpen the contrast in medicare for the rich and the health of the poor. Like previous governments, it also failed to evolve a pro-people health policy for the nation. Under the BJP government, prime government land was given at throw away prices to Corporate interests for making five star hospitals and health care centres for the rich. The urban and rural poor, as also the salaried class were left to their own devices or forced to consult government hospitals and primary health centres which were short on doctors, medicines and equipment. Large scale corruption in public health departments, in connivance with the political masters, contractors and business interests, repeatedly led to epidemics like, dengue and dropsy.

The victims of this political apathy in the health sector have been children, expectant mothers and the aged. After fifty years of Independence, India still has a terrible record in childcare, with infant mortality still unacceptably high. Pre-natal and post-natal care remains non-existent in most rural and tribal areas and in urban slums. The problem is particularly acute for the rapidly expanding population of those past the retirement age. Apart from paying lip service to



the issue, the government has so far failed to come up with a national policy on the aged, nor has it made any budgetary allocations for projects for the aged.

Underlying the callous political attitude on public health is the total abdication of the responsibility to provide potable drinking water to all. Fifteen years after the launch of the National Drinking Water Mission, life's most essential requirement remains a dream for crores of Indians who drink highly polluted, saline or contaminated water. Women continue to fetch water from wells and ponds miles away from home. Even in urban areas, the crisis remains acute.

### **Reservation Policy: Fooling the Masses**

Promises to implement the reservation policy, in matters of recruitment and promotion to all government offices and further extending it to private organisations, were made by many political parties including the BJP in the run up to the last general elections. However, once it came to power, the party and its allies forgot even the minimum demand of filling up all reserved positions in government organisations. While the BJP government showed remarkable alacrity in filling up vacancies with persons from the upper castes and classes, the Dalits, Tribals and other marginalised, once again found themselves ignored and left behind. Whether it were jobs at the top, or employment in lower positions of bureaucracy, primary school teachers, the agencies of the Central government, public sector organisations and state authorities, the members of the Scheduled Castes have been given a step-motherly treatment. In short, the reservation policy has not been implemented and continues to be so. This is substantiated by the SC/ST Commission Reports on representation of SC/ST in Central Government Services. The latest figures are as under:

<b>Group</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>% of SCs</b>	<b>% of STs</b>
Group "A"	65408	10.15	2.89
Group "B"	108857	12.67	2.68
Group "C"	2341863	16.15	5.69
Group "D"	1041082	21.26	6.48

**Source:** Special Report, 1998. *National Commission for SCs and STs*.pp.23.



In other words, the government has almost totally kept men and women of the Scheduled Castes from any senior government posts while giving them occasional sops in the lower categories of employment. As a result, the presence of the SCs and STs in decision making and executive bodies of the government and the economic agencies is absent. This has had a snowballing effect with none in the bureaucracy actually able to either influence or monitor pro-poor and pro-dalit policies and programmes. It is not surprising that programmes and the manner in which they are implemented show an utter disregard for the interests and human needs of these marginalised communities of Indian society.

The upper caste bias of the BJP burst into the open in its opposition to any form of reservation for the OBCs and the SCs\STs in the judicial institutions. The absence of any significant numbers of Dalits in the lower and higher judicial services has been identified as an important reason in the denial of justice to these communities. The President of India, Mr K R Narayanan, was himself moved to point out the near absence of Dalits in the higher judiciary even after fifty years of democratic governance. The BJP summarily ruled out his suggestion. It is distressing that many non-BJP parties accepted the BJP argument and thus failed to support the President's suggestion. It is clear that any opposition to the entry of more Dalits in the higher judiciary only strengthens the existing caste domination and prevents the poor from enjoying the fruits of genuine democracy and the rule of law.

In this context, it has not been surprising that feudal and religious vested interests in the BJP and other political groups have so vehemently opposed the granting of 33 per cent reservation for women in legislative bodies both at the Centre and State levels. The success of women participation in the Panchayati Raj system has conclusively proved their capabilities and indeed the imperativeness of their presence in the political processes. They have fought corruption, focussed on development and have been at the heart of many grassroots peace processes. They can no longer be denied their due place in adequate numbers in the Parliament and the State Legislatures.



Unfortunately, political parties have only used the reservation issue to strengthen their support base. Pro-active programmes and upliftment of discriminated groups has not progressed beyond election slogans and posters, to be discarded after an election victory. Positive discrimination is the most important component of any realistic social reform project. Meaningful socio-economic transformation of Indian society cannot be brought about without an honest commitment to the implementation of reservation policies in all sectors.

### **Minorities, Dalits and Tribals: Children of a Lesser God**

For Eighty years, the Sangh parivar has sought to divide Indian society. It succeeded many times, sparking off much bloodshed. The events of 1992, the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the role played in that shameful act by men and women who were made ministers in the Vajpayee cabinet are a matter of record. After it came to power at the Centre, the party and its government deliberately slowed down investigations. Its allies, the Shiv Sena government in Maharashtra, had no qualms in rejecting the Srikrishna Report and refused to punish those responsible for murdering scores of persons in the 1992-93 riots. In Coimbatore in 1997-98, the Tamil Nadu police under the DMK-government went on a rampage and shot dead persons lying in hospital. The Sangh Parivar went on a nation-wide minority-bashing and hate campaign which still continues. Under the "nationalist" cover-up, criminals were used to harass, humiliate and torture Muslims in Maharashtra and Gujarat by branding them as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. They burnt jhuggis in Delhi's slums. While in 1992, the hate campaign was focussed on the Muslims after the attack on the Babri Masjid, 1998-99 showed an increase in anti-Christian violence. Scores of Churches were demolished, Bibles burnt and attempts were made to obstruct the religious practices of the Christians. Tribals were forcefully reconverted to Hinduism. The final tragedy was the burning alive of Graham Stuart Staines, working among the lepers of Orissa, and his two young sons. Police and judicial investigations have identified



political motives behind the murder. Under the patronage of the BJP-led government at the centre, police and civil authorities in many places have taken a definite communal stance. This is by far one of the most serious fallout of this government.

*In a bid to curb conversions, the VHP has decided to set up, in each district of the country, a team of prominent personalities to keep an eye on Christian and Muslim activities. The VHP's working committee is giving final touches to the plan, which was first chalked out at the 'Dharam Sansad' held at Ahmedabad from February 5 this year. According to the plan, said Lokesh Pratap Singh, VHP's New Delhi media center in-charge, the team would collect data on the activities of Christians and Muslims, the increase in their population over the years, their economic status their sources of income and their contracts. As Part of the plan, the VHP will also set up 10,000 service centres by the end of the year 2000. (The Indian Express, 20 March, 99)*

India's pluralist tradition was never so severely threatened. Sangh ideologues campaigned to define India's unity in uniformity. Efforts were made to seek amendment to Article 29 of the Constitution aimed at "protecting of interests of the minorities and their linguistic and cultural rights" and to take away the right guaranteed to the minorities by Article 30 of the Constitution, that is, to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.

Even the small population of Kabir-Panthis were not spared. The attack on the Kabir-Panthis, who have been articulating an alternative to the caste-based social order within the Indian society, illustrates the alliance's interpretation of secularism and social justice. Dalits and tribals, who had the audacity to challenge such neo-Brahminic resurgence were attacked. The objective of these attacks was to keep the landless Dalits and Tribals subservient to their upper caste masters and to keep the caste order intact.

*Ranveer Sena has 15,000 weapons in central Bihar to fight the Dalits. (The Hindustan Times, 12 March, 99)*



## Saffronising the Education System

The Sangh parivar has also attempted to communalise future generations of Indians by “sanskritising” primary education. The legislation to make primary education compulsory remains a dream. At the Annual Conference of the State Education Ministers, the government insisted that States should reformulate their curriculum of studies from Primary to Higher levels of education, and incorporate “hindu” cultural elements. The intensity of the hate campaign they intend to unleash can be judged from the fact that the name of the Mughal Emperor Akbar was painted black in several text books. Singing of Saraswati Vandana and Vande Mataram, already made compulsory in many schools run by the Sangh Parivar, was sought to be introduced in state run schools too. The Vidya Bharathi syllabus developed by the RSS contained an extended political map of India. India’s multi-cultural inheritance and its pluralistic political ethos was put at stake to gain political mileage. Even the Constitution which posits pluralism as one of its inalienable principles was sought to be negated.

*RSS propagating Hindutva through textbooks. A series of booklets, titled Sanskriti Gyan, giving the RSS perspective of Indian history and culture, have been distributed in the 6,000-odd Saraswati Shishu Mandirs and the Vidya Bharati-run schools. The BJP-led government in Rajasthan has also effected changes in the text books prescribed by the Rajasthan Board of Secondary Education by incorporating the RSS view point”. (Times of India, 25 Oct. 98)*

## Agricultural Priorities: A Shift from People to Corporates

The Indian farmer has never had it so bad as at the threshold of the new millennium. Agriculture is the mainstay of our economy and an estimated 70 percent of the Indian population depend for their livelihood on this sector. The acceptance of the policy of globalization in the early 1990s, by the then Congress Government, was a turning point for Indian agriculture. It launched the process of mortgaging the rights of the Indian farmers to corporate entities in the name of food security. Today, the ill effects of that policy are coming to light.



The Indian farmer, clobbered time and again by the vagaries of nature, is forced to compete with global forces without active state assistance. The result is many small farmers and sharecroppers, mainly from dalit, tribal and other marginalised communities, are unable to bear the pressure, have committed suicides in different parts of the country. The situation of the medium and large farmers is no better. Their means of livelihood: land, water, livestock and seeds, are gradually being appropriated by national and international “corporate bodies” in the name of liberalisation.

*The budget has not addressed the thrust areas of removal of literacy and improvement in infrastructure. As against 1997-98, the current allocation for schemes like Operation Black Board and Teachers Training Programme are the same at Rs.304 and 159 crore, respectively. The allocation for non-formal education has declined from Rs.325 to 309 crore and so is the treatment meted out to vocational education. (The Pioneer, 21 July, 99)*

After 1991, particularly in the past two years, in absolute terms there has been an increase in the number of those below the poverty line. There is also evidence to suggest that the intensity and severity of poverty has increased among those below the poverty line. These can definitely be attributed to the policy of globalisation. The BJP-led government not only continued with this policy, but gave it an additional thrust. The hike in fertilizer prices recommended in the 1998-99 budget proved that, this government was more active than its predecessors in encouraging the marginalisation of the Indian farmers. By succumbing to pressures from international financial and regulatory institutions, like the World Bank, IMF, WIPO and the WTO, it allowed our policies, especially in the agricultural sector to be dictated from outside. This government, like the previous ones, tacitly allowed patenting of biodiversity material. As a result, seeds which were earlier owned collectively by farmers became private property of seed companies.

The anti-farmer and anti-people Patents Bill, recently passed by this government with active support from the Congress and other



parties, proves beyond doubt that, most within our polity, have joined hands with the TNCs and MNCs. Contrary to their commitment to promote “Swadeshi” the BJP-led government offered the red carpet to Monsanto, a \$ 7.5 billion seeds and bio-tech MNC, to not only enter the Indian market but also set up R&D facilities through 100 per cent subsidies. This was done without investigating the allegations that this MNC is currently involved in researches on “terminator gene” technology which sterilizes seeds and has the potential to threaten food security of millions of people around the world. The opening of gates to one MNC has set a bad precedent for future development in this sector.

By failing to prevent alienation of agricultural land from small farmers, belonging to dalit and tribal communities, to the industrialists, MNCs, construction companies and other business entities, this government proved itself worse than its predecessors. The amendments to Urban Land Ceilings Act, done at the behest of business groups and individuals to allow them acquire or purchase any amount of land in urban areas illustrates its pro-rich orientation. The Land Acquisition (Amendment) Bill, 1998, given final shape by this government, if passed would affect the small and marginal farmers the most. It has the potential to widen the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in rural India.

*The Land Acquisition Amendment Bill 1998 not just strengthens the Collector's role in deciding cases including appeals on acquisition but also makes the High Court as the appellate Court. This certainly makes it more difficult for a commoner, especially women to get a fair value of their land. The amendments are geared to make acquisition of land easier which will help multinationals and other business groups to acquire land through government cooperation. This will further marginalise the underprivileged.*

In the name of growth and development, this government never hid its determination to transfer control of natural resources, production systems, market and trade from state and local communities to the MNCs and other business groups. It thus set into motion



a process of disempowerment and dispossession of the small farmers, landless labourers and tribal communities over their common property resources. This is a gross violation of the principles of grassroots democracy and a major threat to the livelihood and consequent survival of many of these social groups.

## **Industrial Development: Silencing the “Swadeshi” Slogan**

The BJP-led government was primarily at the service of industrialists, traders and other business interests. The mustard oil adulteration scandal that took place in Delhi and its adjacent areas, along with the onion hoarding scam, confirmed a nexus between traders, government officials and politicians. The regularity with which business malpractices were reported in the past one year across the country proves a near absence of trade and business administration. Even the adopted policies were aimed at helping business interests to the disadvantage of the common Indian.

Practically, every legislation on trade and development passed by the 12th Lok Sabha, was aimed at enticing and accommodating global capital into the country and consequently making Indians vulnerable to loot and plunder by MNCs and TNCs. Several deals and sell-outs were announced, the most baser being that of the state owned Maruti Motors to the Japanese automobile giant Suzuki. Rather than putting an end to the disinvestment programme initiated by the past few governments to earn easy money, this government vigorously pursued it, conveniently forgetting its own “swadeshi” rhetoric.

During the past 13 months, all possible efforts were made to solicit “videshi” capital and technology in pushing the tempo of economic development. Subsidies were liberalised and generously offered to all foreign participants. A direct fall out of these concessions was that Indian industries, especially in the small and the medium sectors, received less attention and support. They were substantially affected. According to the government’s own submission, the growth rate in the manufacturing sector came down from 6.9 percent in 1997-98 to 3.7 percent in 1998-99. On the other hand,



the Indian market remained flooded with fast moving consumer goods of MNCs like, Pepsi, Coke, McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, electronic goods from the companies like LG, Electrolux, Whirlpool, automobiles from Ford, Suzuki, Daewoo, Hyundai and others.

Another casualty of this "unstable" coalition has been international trade and its related Exim policy. For the common Indian, its consequences were felt in terms of inflation and scarcity of essential commodities. The price rise of onions and other vegetables, is an example of the short-sightedness and even anti-people character of the trade policies pursued. In economic terms too, the present Exim policy proved itself to be a failure. Data on India's international trade during the past 13 months indicates a negative trend.

## **Media: Chained and Under Attack**

The BJP-led government once again enslaved the official media after its brief spring of independence under the Prasar Bharati. The government used both Doordarshan and All India Radio, as well as other government media and information agencies, to propagate the Sangh Parivar's "Hindutva" ideology. The professed aim of Prasar Bharati Bill, conceived by the National Front government, was to help create an independent Doordarshan and All India Radio and thus prevent their being the mouthpieces of the state. This was not acceptable to this government. It allowed the existing ordinance to lapse and then came up with an alternative Prasar Bharati Bill which proposed lesser independence to the state-owned media.

This government, in fact, introduced a new kind of domination through intimidation, threat and harassment of media personalities. Several journalists were either harassed, threatened or killed. TV channel and Cable TV operators were threatened to fall in line with the dictates of the ruling alliance. In an extraordinary decision all cable TV operators in Maharashtra were asked by the Shiv Sena not to telecast the Cricket matches between India and Pakistan.

The coming general elections give an opportunity to the people to say they do not want such political parties and groups to hold



the nation to ransom at the threshold of the new millennium. At stake is the unity, integrity and plural culture of our country, its economic and social development and the welfare of its 100 crore people.

## APPEAL

The coming General Elections place before us two options: To either remain passive and allow a handful of fanatics to take us back to a medieval barbarism or to intervene decisively and collectively in the electoral process to safeguard, reconstruct and strengthen our pluralist, multi-lingual, multi-religious culture and society. We will be betraying the cause of this nation if we were to remain passive. Anyone who loves India, its people and its integrity and unity cannot be a bystander at this crucial moment. It is time to confront divisive, communal and retrogressive forces.

As citizens of a democratic and secular polity we must with the deepest sense of responsibility and concern take a proactive stand in the coming elections in deciding whom to bring to power and whom to prevent. We desire a government that is honest, responsive and transparent; a government that is committed to protecting the basic human rights of all its citizens. Government must be committed to the citizen's right to information on all its activities, strengthening mechanisms to ensure maximum transparency and accountability. Above all, government must simplify procedures so that the common citizen is able to approach it for the redressal of his or her problems.

This Peoples' Agenda for the General Elections expects political parties and candidates to assure that the new government will commit to the following:

### **I. Cultural Pluralism and Indian Identity:**

1. To defeat forces defining India's "unity in uniformity", adequate encouragement should be provided to individuals and groups working for the renaissance of the subaltern cultures. The government should commit itself to help evolve the authentic Indian identity



which is based on “unity in diversity”.

2. Protect the secular character of the Constitution. Protect the cultural identity and symbols of the Tribals, the Dalits and the religious minorities, including their places of worship, the Churches, Mosques, Viharas and temples.
3. Strengthen the law to ensure that powerful or aggressive groups do not swamp the mass media, literature, and public space to force, and to make such acts by individuals or groups as a cognisable offence.
4. Constitute statutory independent and secular bodies to write and monitor textbooks, evolve curricula of studies and work at pedagogy.
5. Ban fundamentalist organisations that create hostility among social groups in society.

## **II. Protection and progress of Minorities:**

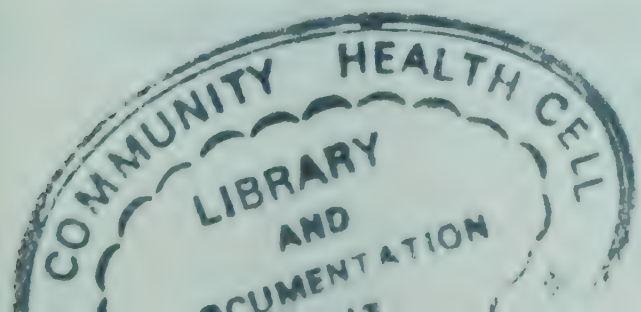
1. Protect and strengthen provisions under Articles 29 and 30 of the Constitution and ensure that State governments and local bodies do not erode this freedom under any pretext.
2. Take proactive steps at all levels to ensure adequate representations of minorities at all levels of civil, police, military and judicial recruitment. Police reforms to be implemented to ensure that the protection of the law is genuinely extended to minority groups.
3. Remove impediments placed by State and local bodies in the opening of minority schools, and to commit state governments to facilitate the study of languages such as Urdu and tribal languages as additional media of education, specially in the primary classes.
4. Transfer of more powers to the Minority Commission by making it a quasi-judicial body that can adjudicate cases of atrocities on the minorities, and equipping it with adequate investigating agencies on the lines of the National Human Rights Commission. Imparting discretionary power to the President (and not the government or party in power) in deciding the appointment of the Chairman and Members.



5. Urgent steps for the economic uplift of minorities, including availability of seed capital and credit, and encouraging self employment, entrepreneurship in micro and village level economic activities.
6. Political parties must commit themselves to removing the black Presidential order of 1950 which communalised the reservation policy by denying its benefits to Muslims and Christians.

### **III. Schemes for SCs/STs and OBCs:**

1. Segments of society oppressed for millenniums need continuing protection of reservations. All reservation quotas for SCs, STs and OBCs in education, especially higher education, should be implemented forthwith. Reservation in employment and promotion to be implemented on a time-bound basis.
2. The past few years have witnessed the government's gradual delegation of its commitment towards employment generation to the private sector. The private Corporate sector, therefore must accept reservations in jobs for the SCs, STs and the OBC categories as its commitment to affirmative action and equal-opportunity regime.
3. Emphasis should be placed to legislate special reservations for women belonging to the SC, ST and OBC category at all levels of administration.
4. Special courts with a reasonable number of sitting judges from the two communities to be set up in SC and ST majority areas to safeguard the interests of these communities.
5. Ownership rights on land that has been distributed to SCs and STs should be granted forthwith.
6. Initiate necessary changes in special tenancy laws in the tribal areas to plug loopholes.
7. Evolve a comprehensive plan for the Human resource development of these communities which integrates their education, health and social welfare.





#### **IV. Women and Child care:**

1. Initiate a comprehensive review of all social legislations on women, like the anti-dowry and rape laws, child marriage prohibition law etc. Based on the review, necessary changes should be made in these laws to make them more effective.
2. Extend reservation of seats in legislative bodies both at the Center and State levels.
3. Launch a nationwide campaign to end discrimination against women and the girl child through a process of empowerment, education and legal rights.
4. All anti-poverty programmes should have women as their special target group.
5. Clarify the National Policy on Children, since 38% of the population of India is below the age of 15 years.
6. Make provisions for day care centres for children of urban and rural poor. Introduce mid-day meals for all children up to the Fifth class.
7. Take urgent and time bound steps to reduce infant mortality rate of the girl child in the next five years.

#### **V. Health:**

1. Health must be recognised as a human right. Health must be seen as a social problem like poverty, unemployment, urbanisation and education and accordingly be given due priority in the annual budget.
2. Health policy should be oriented to the needs of marginalised majority rather than serving as the handmaiden of the privileged few in society.
3. People's participation in managing their own health care systems must be encouraged.
4. The new health policy should be able to integrate the modern system of medicine with other traditional systems. PHCs should be planned in villages in such a way that they do not destroy the existing traditional systems of medicines.



## **VI. Human Rights:**

1. Primary education should be made a fundamental right.
2. Respect for Human Rights must be a basic feature of state policy, and must be reflected in all actions of government, and the private sector.
3. Special Human rights courts must be set up to expedite cases and ensure punitive action against guilty.
4. Police reforms must be implemented urgently, by implementing the Dharm Vira Committee recommendations on the recruitment and training of the police, and steps to insulate it from political interference.
5. Human Rights education must be introduced in school curricula at an early stage.
6. Evolve effective sensitisation programmes, both inside and outside prisons, to advance social justice and harmony by reducing the crime rate in the society. Initiate non-partisan and strict actions against law-breakers to maintain law and order in society.
7. Resolve to protect the human rights of the poor and marginalised sections. Create an environment of tolerance and publicise the state's resolve to provide for equality of all its citizens irrespective of sex, caste, class and religion with an action plan.

## **VII. Environment:**

1. To evolve development policy that protect natural resources and promote environment that favours marginalised communities.
2. The parties in election must propose their respective proposals for sustainable development.

## **VIII. Local Self-Government Institutions:**

1. Panchayati Raj Institutions to be made statutory and given effective powers. All activities at the grass roots level, especially development and education should be under the PRIs. All decisions should be left to the PRIs at the local level.
2. There is need to allow for more participation of women in the



PRIs. To realise this objective, women belonging to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe should be given proportional reservation.

3. Tribal self-rule institutions should be provided with more funds to enable local communities manage their community properties.

## **IX. Electoral Reforms:**

1. A complete ban on the use of “religious” concepts, issues and symbols by political parties. This ban should also be extended to parties contesting on religious identities.
2. Evolve realistic mechanisms to curb corruption in public places and criminalisation of politics based on the Vorah Committee findings. Persons with criminal cases pending against them in courts should be debarred from contesting elections.
3. Evolve guidelines for the conduct of “caretaker” governments.

## **X. Employment:**

1. Evolve programmes to realise the goal of sustainable and employment intensive growth. Stress on self employment through promotion of Village industries and small scale industries.
2. Agricultural growth will generate lakhs of additional employment. This growth can only be brought about by initiating a nationwide land reforms programme so that most landless and agricultural labourers get legal titles over the land they work.
3. Recent trends indicate massive growth at the middle levels specifically in urban or semi-urban environments. There should be more stress on job creation at the lower levels (grassroots) in the villages through special employment generation programmes.
4. National service schemes to involve fresh graduates in key nation building activities like literacy campaigns, rural development etc.
5. Restructure the education system by intergating education with employment. Provide more space for technical and vocational training.
6. Review the implementation of schemes like JRY and make con-



certed efforts to eliminate all bottlenecks in order to provide minimum 100 days work in a year to at least two persons per family.

## **XI. Labour:**

1. Minimum wages to be linked to the national inflation index or other relevant price indices so that they automatically get revised.
2. Enhance participation of labour in management.
3. Take steps to enhance the welfare of workers in the unorganised sector. Social security and compulsory insurance cover for workers, especially women, working in the unorganised sector.
4. Proper implementation of Child Labour and Bonded labour prohibition Acts with will and power.
5. Government must declare minimum wages for all States.

## **XII. National Security and Foreign Policy:**

1. Work in collaboration with the international community in objectively realising the goal of nuclear and conventional disarmament.
2. Make efforts to establish cordial relations with immediate neighbours through a series of confidence building measures like establishment of trade links, enhanced people to people contact, regular interaction between the senior officers of armed forces and restrain in the use of historical tensions for cheap political mileage.
3. Resolve to play a more active role in the UN and work towards revitalising the Non-Aligned Movement.
4. Establish closer contacts with the Third world especially the Latin American and African countries which are virtually cut off from us even though we share similar historical experiences. A bloc thus formed can only protect us from the pressures of globalization unleashed by the first world.
5. Enforce the one-rank-one pay principle for pensions of defence personnel. Ensure rehabilitation of retired jawans, sailors and air-men who constitute a highly trained and motivated work force.



### **XIII. Mass Media:**

1. Immediate steps to grant every citizen the Right to Information, the bedrock of the freedom of the Press.
2. Ensure the freedom of the government-controlled Doordarshan, All India Radio, DAVP and Field Publicity by reviving and strengthening the Prasar Bharati.
3. Strengthen the Press Council and enable it to prevent the suborning of mass media, government or private, to subserve narrow sectarian or economic interests. Ensure public accountability of mass media.
4. Encourage rural media and print and electronic media for smaller ethnic communities.
5. Halt abuse of Doordarshan for propagation of religion, superstition or obscurantism, and encourage it to inculcate scientific temper.
6. Initiate steps to revitalise and encourage all traditional forms of mass-media, like folklores, yatras, streetplays etc.

### **XIV. Agriculture:**

1. Evolve mechanisms to protect the interests of small and marginal farmers because they constitute a vast majority of those directly involved in agriculture. The orientation of the new agriculture policy should be towards fulfilling their needs and aspirations.
2. Use the Union Government's overriding powers to force States, which have made little or no progress in initiating land reforms, so as to provide security of tenure to the actual tillers of land. States should also be forced to initiate land consolidation measures, distribution of surplus land and upgradation and maintenance of accurate land records.
3. Strengthening and simplification of the agricultural credit regime so that the benefits reach the small farmers in the remotest areas who desperately need such assistance.
4. Stress on minor irrigation schemes which are more beneficial to the small and marginal farmers than construction of medium and



major irrigation projects. Major irrigation schemes have proved to be beneficial to Zamindars and have been responsible for displacement of small farmers.

5. Rationalise the subsidies regime so that farmers, especially the small and marginal ones, who desperately need support to make their farm produce competitive, can avail them. Presently, much of the subsidies go to “corporate” farmers operating on large holdings.
6. Stress on revitalising traditional farming techniques with the use of local resources. Evolve mechanisms to protect the intellectual property rights of the farmers along with biodiversity.
7. Evolve effective mechanism to strengthen forward and backward farm linkages, so that farmers can get quality inputs at cheaper rates and can sell their produce at remunerative prices.
8. Evolve new land use policies and ban conversion of agricultural land to industrial or other purposes.
9. Discourage corporate farming and encourage group farming in the form of farmer’s cooperatives or farmer’s associations.
10. Initiate necessary changes in the domestic market so that flow of agricultural produce between the States is much easier and markets stable.
11. Provide easy and prompt loans schemes to small and marginal farmers and formulate stringent laws to prevent their exploitation by money lenders.

## **XV. Industry:**

1. Rethink the existing industrial development paradigm. Initiate a national debate on the nature, content and pace of globalization, liberalisation and privatisation.
2. Continue with the policy of having public sector participation in certain basic industries like steel, oil and natural gas, mineral processing, telecom etc. rather than a blanket privatisation in all types of industries.
3. Abolition of all subsidies and tax holidays to large-scale industries



operating in the private sector. Abolition of Inspector Raj and promotion of voluntary compliance and self regulation based on trust.

4. Revitalise the village industries sector by providing incentives. Evolve realistic programmes to develop the small scale sector by strengthening its technology, finance and marketing bases.
5. Review our Export-Import policies to meet the needs and demands of the people and address them on a priority basis, so that incidence like onion prices of 1998 are not repeated.
6. Take firm steps to revive sick industrial units so as to prevent retrenchment of employees.

## **XVI. The Voluntary Sector:**

1. Initiate steps to induct the voluntary sector in the development process as partners and collaborators.
  2. Evolve mechanisms to utilise the expertise and understanding of the NGOs in development policy formulation and decision making.
  3. Rationalise state control over the voluntary sector funding by removing the restrictive clauses in the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). We particularly call to stop recent attempts to use the FCRA as an instrument of harassment and coercion of human rights movements and minority groups and institutions.
  4. Set up an independent grievance redressal mechanism at the national-level to resolve differences between the state and the voluntary sector.
  5. People and voluntary organisations must have access to all information pertaining to development issues which have consequences for their well being.
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## ORGANIZATIONS

All India Catholic Union  
Anjali  
Bahujan Swayam Sevak Sangh  
Bharatiya Sahitya Academy  
Bihar Dalit Vikas Samiti  
Catholic Religious of India  
C.D.S.A.  
Central Secretariat SC/ST Employees Association  
Centre for Concern for Child Labour  
Centre for Women's Development  
Centre for Dalit Alternative Media  
Centre For Education and Communication  
Child Labour Action Network  
Dalit Intellectual Forum  
Delhi Science Forum  
Evangelical Fellowship of India  
FORCES  
Foundation for Educational Development  
Greenpeace International  
Indian Social Institute  
Initiative for National Renewal and Empowerment of People  
Jan Adhikar Sangthan  
Jesuits in Social Action  
Minority Opinion Makers Forum  
National Institute of Social Work & Social Sciences  
Nishant Natya Manch  
Peoples Development and Peace Foundation  
Rahul Multidisciplinary Research Centre  
Rastriya Jagrati Manch  
SC/ST Advocates Association  
Secular Initiative  
Shabda Communications  
Social Action Centre



**Society for Conflict Analysis and Resolution**  
**Society for Depressed Classes**  
**United Christian Forum for Human Rights**  
**United Dalit Students Forum of JNU**  
**Vishal Jagrati**  
**Voluntary Association Network India**  
**Y.M.C.A.**

### **Individuals**

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*The Indian Constitution conceived a secular polity, demanding the state to keep itself away from any form of religious identity. This government, led by a party whose programmes and actions are rooted in religious identity has failed to live up to those expectations. It unabashedly promoted "hindutva" in the guise of nationalism and openly threatened the minorities of severe consequences if they refused to subscribe to its "one nation, one people and one culture" thesis. To divert people's attention from its failures in the social and economic front, it tried to hide itself behind a veil of communal hysteria. Front organisations of the Sangh Parivar were allowed to incite a culture of majoritism, chauvinism, hatred, hegemony, suspicion and social violence among the masses. Dalits, poor, secular and progressive segments of the society, not agreeing to the hindutva ideology were labeled anti-national. The announcement by the Sangh Parivar that it would construct a "shakti" temple at the Pokharan nuclear test site reflects the ruling group's inclination to "Hinduisse" and hijack patriotism.*